Urban or Public Art?

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Abstract

The inconclusive discourses around urban art, public art, and urban art have generated an array of terminological designations. In this paper, I analyze the impacts of the terminology's rapidly changing usage in Lisbon between 2008 and 2014. In the Lisbon World Expo '98, open-air sculptures and art installations were labeled under the heading of "urban art program" (arte urbana). This illustrates a growing use of a designation that identified something new and distinct from traditional fine arts, nearer to the concept of public art (Lamas, 2000: 152).

A decade later, in 2008, the Lisbon city council commissioned a series of group paintings in outdoor panels developed with the purpose of graffiti management. The expression "urban art" (arte urbana) was used again, but this time with a totally different meaning, namely "[…] to confirm graffiti and street art as recognizable and recognized expressions of urban art as an artistic subculture globally present in world metropolises" (Carvalho and Câmara, 2014). This paper traces the development and use of this terminology in Lisbon.

Keywords: Urban Art, public art, urban design, street art, graffiti, Lisbon

1 - Public Art

1.1 - The origins of the term public art

In the UK, Morris and Ruskin understood "public art" as a reaction to the industrial revolution in the second half of 19th century, situating it as a natural development of the arts and crafts movement but with ornamental and socially engaged characteristics. It was disseminated through Belgium and Germany by Henry van de Velde (Abreu, 2015; 14 – 27).

The artist Eugène Broerman (1861–1932) coined the term "public art," describing it for the first time in an article entitled "L'Art Régénérateur". In 1893, he spoke of "L'œuvre de l'art appliqué à la rue et aux objets d'utilité publique": "The work of art applied to the street and to objects of public utility" may be what today corresponds to good quality urban environments for public use (Cheron, 2011; 701).

This movement culminated in the organization of international conferences (with wide city council attendance) and generated the foundation of "Institut International d'Art Public," which published twelve volumes of the periodical "L'Art Public" from 1907 to 1912. However, the parallel emergence of the first modern art movements in the early 20th century (i.e., Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism, and Futurism) conflicted with the conservative aesthetic that was associated with this initial public art movement. This confrontation with the progressive aesthetics of early modernity was fatal, as the public was not interested in the conservative aesthetic adopted by L'Art Public.

Fig. 1 - Catalogue of the first International Congress of Public Art 1898, Brussels.
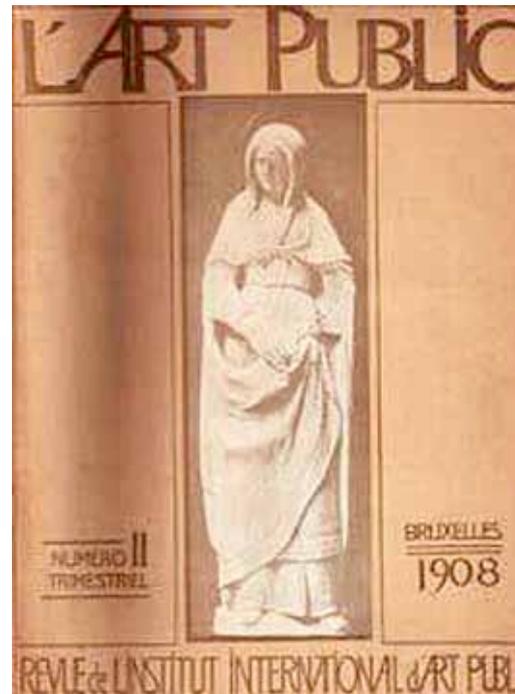

Fig. 2 - L'Art Public, n. II, 1908, Brussels.

1.2 – North American use of the term Public Art

During the same period in the USA, the term Public Art had a different meaning. The City Beautiful Movement, a reform philosophy of North American architecture and urban planning that thrived during the 1890s and 1900s, presented some initial resonance with the European use of the term public art, with its focus on monuments and neoclassical revival. However, the Anglo-Saxon literature supports the view that public art (as we understand it today) originated in the New Deal program called Art-in-Architecture (A-i-A), a structure for funding public art that is still in use today (a percentage of the new building costs goes to art programs.)

According to Knight (2008), public art radically changed during the 1970s following the civil rights movement and its claims on the public space, the alliance between urban regeneration programs and artistic interventions in the late 1960s, and the revision of the notion of sculpture. In this context, public art acquired a status that went beyond mere decoration and the visualization of official national histories in public space as in Europe in the 19th century. It therefore gained autonomy as a form of site construction and intervention in the realm of public interests.

In addition, environmental public art is considered as a means to raise ecological awareness through a green urban design process. And in this context, it is relevant to mention the trial around Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc,*[1] which shows the essential role played by site-specificity in public art – as an element often intrinsic to the art work itself, which sets the parameters for the use of the space it defines.

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1 - Michalos, Christina. "Murdering Art: Destruction of Art Works and Artists' Moral Rights" in *The Trials of Art*, edited by Daniel McClean, 173-193. London: Ridinghouse, 2007.

1.3 - Is Mural painting also Public Art?

There is a long history of mural painting, from Egypt, Christianity, and the Middle Ages through the Renaissance. However, with the purpose of superficial characterization, we begin our survey of muralism in the early 20th century. Speaking with reference to mural painting at the Bauhaus, Oskar Schlemmer wrote in his diary:

"Mural painting, rightly praised as a genre that is capable of accomplishing an emphatic relationship to space and architecture, in contrast to the autonomous character of easel-painting and the associated danger of l´art pour l'art, must find an appropriate site and solution here at the Bauhaus." (Schlemmer, 1922 cit. in Harrison e Wood, 2003:307).

The political Mexican murals by Diego Rivera or David Alfaro Siqueiros contained clear and direct critics to advertising (Harrison & Wood, 2003: p. 429-431). It was argued that, "the creators of beauty must use their efforts to produce ideological works of art for the people (...)" (*ibidem*: 406-407). Also, the Italian fascists, for instance Mario Sironi (1885-1961) in his manifesto "Mural Painting Manifesto" 1933, praised mural painting as a strategy for ideology dissemination (*ibidem*: 424-426).

In fact, scale and visibility in relation to costs generate outdoor large-scale mural painting as a very effective option for communication and reaching large audiences. The surface support of the creation, the "skin" of the city, the limit between private and public, is common to both muralism and graffiti or street art, but in mural painting there often exists consent for the production of the work, a limit crossed by ephemeral, spontaneous non-commissioned Graffiti and Street art.

A clear distinction between muralism and public art is much harder to make. Muralism is a self-contained genre, which has its own specificities. The question is how many of these characteristics are contained within the public art concept. For instance, some key reference artists, such as Mexican muralists, produced work within the New Deal program A-i-A that constituted one of the main streams of public art expression.

1.4 - The Public Art Problematic

There are a number of competing place and production-oriented definitions of public art. For instance, Hayden (1995, 68) describes public art as, "artwork that depends on its context; it is an amalgamation of events – the physical appearance of a site, its history, the socio-economic dimensions of the community, and the artist's intervention."

Antoni Remesar (2000) provides an even more encompassing definition of public art that accords it an elevated status as a 'generator of meaningful places':

when I speak of public art I use the concept in a very general way, I understand it like a group of "artefacts" of dominant aesthetic characteristics that furnishes the public space. (…) This perspective over the concept allows the conception of public art as a generator of meaningful places "co-production" agent, and not just an "artistic" manifestation placed in public space. As a producer of sense of place and through the capacity to generate meaning and "identity", public art would be one of the key elements to put in practice the social processes of appropriation of space. Therefore, when I speak of public art, I refer myself to things like public space design, landscaping, sculpture, performances, etc. (...) and in conclusion (…) this art is possible when the regeneration program principles are based in the values of sustainability and in social cohesion, put in practice in their real dimension and not just like propaganda arguments, like usual (…)."

Contemporary definitions of public art are limited in that they often do not agree on what the expression means in practice. In turn, this lack of consensus has generated many discussions of the term's usage, which influenced the emergence of other terms that try to escape what some regarded as the problematic flexibility and over-inclusiveness of the term 'public art.'

2 - Origins and usages of the concept of Urban Art

Several aspects influence the diffuse meaning of the term Urban art. For example, one of the aspects is the language in which the reference to the term is made. In this French language article, the expression Urban art is used to identify certain aspects of Alberti's treaty - *De Re Aedificatoria*:

"[…] The constitutive function of this aesthetic requirement was formulated very early by one of the greatest theorists in the history of town planning (or more precisely urban art), the humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) who set forth the principle in his De re aedificatoria, published in 1483[…]."[2]

The expression "Urban art" also arises in reference to the work of pre-culturalists like John Ruskin or William Morris or cultural urbanists like Camillo Sitte and Ebenezer Howard (Choay, 2003). As Alberti, these authors identify the "Urban art" concept as Urbanism, or even building, underlining the aesthetic component. The transition from image-based plans to urban planning changed the original meaning and purpose of the term, processes that for instance in Portugal happened since 1954 (Lobo, 1995).

2.1 - 1998 Lisbon EXPO'98 Urban Art concept

In the Lisbon World EXPO' 98, the open-air sculpture and art installations were labeled as an "Urban art program" (Arte Urbana) by its commissaries António Mega Ferreira and António Manuel Pinto. With the participation of national (Portuguese) and international artists, the Lisbon World EXPO' 98 contained approximately 50 pieces, the majority of which were three-dimensional works, but which also contained two-dimensional works such as pavements, murals and tiles, in an open area of 330 acres. The Lisbon World EXPO' 98 offered space and resources for innovative urban experiences created from the desire to realize new philosophies for the occupation of space.

EXPO' 98 was developed as part of a new form of understanding urban space, that created a new urban landscape in the texture of a very old city. In the words of António Mega Ferreira, this Urban art program represents the sum of the parts that had been profiled as indispensable elements for the construction of the landscape, not as decorative figuration, but as a common point for a dialogue about a strategy of deconstruction and re-construction of the urban space that culminates in the EXPO' 98 area, but that inevitably was expanded to the complete intervention area. Because of that, it is not considered a program where the interventions encountered the reason for existing in a specific sectorial strategy dedicated to the visual arts, but in the concrete placement and discourse that should embody the EXPO' 98 area.

In the catalogue, Pinto and Ferreira (1998) identified 24 artists and works. Each piece is part of a greater self, that is present in the whole area, for eyes, hands, body, and intelligence sensitivity. In a discourse characterized by time,

2 - Original quote in French: "(...)La fonction constitutive de cette exigence esthétique fut très tôt formulée par l'un des plus grands théoriciens de l'histoire de l'urbanisme (ou plus exactement de l'art urbain), l'humaniste Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), qui en énonça le principe dans son De re aedificatoria, publié en 1483 (…)". *L'urbanisme - De l'art urbain à l'urbanisme* in LA VEDAN, Pierre (1975). *Histoire de l'urbanisme à Paris.* Paris: Hachette

Mega Ferreira writes that the works will not make sense if left to the criminal hand of time or neglect – and indeed, 17 years later, the city council is proceeding with restoration and conservation. Ferreira continues with the argument that there will be a time where the simple removal of one of these works will shock by the amputation of part of the group. And when they are missed, in the noise that these pieces make, they will fully live in the place and memory of what they were, and how they served to say all that the EXPO'98 space wanted to say.

António Manuel Pinto (1998) shares different perspectives on the topic of Urban art as it relates to EXPO '98. He specifically emphasizes his concerns about life in urban public space, and how the urban art program could be a great opportunity for the realization of new experiences, bearing in mind the EXPO '98 conditions of funding resources and space. Pinto also identifies the problem of the ecological validity of many contemporary art projects (called at this point: Urban art) introduced in public space.

The commissaries hoped that the introduction of artistic projects would have an influence on the usage of the territory that was being created, trying through them to overcome general preconceptions that prevail in the understanding of a public art project. Clearly, Urban art as expression is here used to detach any resonance in the mind of some architects and artists that public art consists in a static statuary element in the middle of the square - a paradigm of older definitions of the term. They hoped that this new urban space would accordingly be perceived as more dynamic.

The project aimed to relaunch the image of public space, with an open, shared and positive image. In this way nine of the central (Intervention Zone of the EXPO'98) pieces aimed to overcome the state of anonymity that the public space suffers from, by generating places for permanence, and humanizing the profile of the urban landscape of the new city. Artists and other agents were charged with the task of overcoming the monolithic character of the city, generating new reference places for citizens, building reactions against indifference and apathy, and generating paradoxical objects and discontinuities within the urban grid.

The commissaries aimed to escape the historical restrictions of the role of the public art object in urban landscapes. They sought instead to generate art places. The commissaries understood that the intervention of the artist in public space should result in a transgressive element, not pacified within the city structure. This pushed the works beyond mere aesthetic value or artistic gesture – forcing the artists to question the social value of their work and the place that it occupies within urban spatial logic.

2.2 - Urban Art, Graffiti and Street Art
The records tell us that Urban art was associated with Graffiti and Street art for the first time in the exhibition Spank the Monkey of 2006, in Gateshead, UK (Bengtsen, 2014, 67). The term emerges from the set of problems that appeared as a product of the distance between Graffiti and Street art and the established art world. It was born from the need to solve the issue of addressing and representing Graffiti and Street art in the context of indoor, institutional and/or commercial cultural agents.

Since 2008, the auction house Bonhams promoted periodic auctions specializing in Urban art. In 2009, the discussion forum Banksy.info changed its name into the Urban Art Association. Nevertheless, in both circumstances, there were no definitions or clarifications made regarding the meaning of the term's usage in its essence and in relation to Graffiti and Street art. Divergent reactions occurred in both the Street art world and in the established art world because of this lack of definition (Mathew, 2008).

The occasional use of Urban art as a synonym for Street art frustrates some in the world of Street art. The connotation and commercial viability of the expression Urban art meant that the placement of works in the street and sometimes just the reference to the street became vehicles for a commercial career. In this situation the relation to those who spontaneously produce Street art has become unclear, as it quickly can turn into Urban art marketing that potentially it will later be sold.

In the Portuguese context the expression Urban art is also put in relation with graffiti as "actions that are made in the environment of the cities by graffiti writers (…) potentiated by museological programs or of the big entertainment multinational enterprises like 'Cow parades'" (Andrade, Marques, Barros, 2010).

2.3 - 2008 Lisbon - Urban Art Gallery (Galeria de Arte Urbana, GAU)
In October 2008, the program "Urban Art Gallery" was launched in Lisbon. Physically it was an open-air structure, composed of painted JCDecaux advertising panels, but conceptually it was a city wide program of actions organized by the city council, advised by some authors and agents (in which the author of this text, Vhils, Ram, Mar, among others were involved). For this purpose, a small brochure[3] was published containing a proposal for the usage of the term "Urban art", where a line is drawn to the work of the already mentioned pre-urbanists such as Morris and Ruskin (Choay, 2003). Some years later, the city council responsible for structures in Calçada da Glória, near Bairro Alto released a statement that served to "confirm the graffiti and street art as recognizable and recognized expressions of urban art, as an artistic subculture that is present in the world metropolis" (Carvalho, Câmara, 2014).

By designating "graffiti and street as (...) expressions of urban art", in the context of the urban rehabilitation of the Bairro Alto area, the council clearly do not intend to relate their work directly to the Urban art, Graffiti and Street art. At the same time, this statement represents an attempt to connect to these uncommissioned forms by recognizing their global existence. This is assumed in the context of their parallel connection to the expression "Urban art" as a form of urbanism, or drawing the city, practiced by cultural urbanists within the arts and crafts movement.

Of course, all of these developments were informed by the Graffiti and Street art relevant to Lisbon's historical developments, which are necessarily connected to global dynamics. At this point, it is also relevant to have in mind the proposed three typologies that describe Urban art in Lisbon (Neves, 2015 p. 121 – 134). These are the typology of formation, which includes the cultural urbanists' application of the term urban art as a form of drawing the city, and which also encompasses material signs of use of and in urban territories; the pre-formal typology, which incorporates subcultural graffiti and street art in its non-commissioned aspects; and the formal typology, which includes institutionalised forms of urban art such as muralism, contemporary art, and public art.

3 - Conclusions
In modernity, the term public art emerged without the earlier utopian ideal of the socially engaged characteristics of arts and crafts. Postmodern public art recaptures these socially engaged dimensions but is still located within the realm of the "art world". Thus, perhaps at this level public art is more limited as a concept than it was at the end of the 19th century.

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3 - This brochure was disseminated with a box containing post cards of the initial paintings in the "Galeria de Arte Urbana",
promoted by the Lisbon city council with the support of the Friday's project in October of 2008.

Urban Art was initially related to Arts and Crafts from a planning perspective, and (again) to the utopian ideal of the socially engaged characteristics of arts and crafts. Urban art as a term that now encompasses Graffiti and Street art also incorporates the histories of the usage of these other terms. This phenomenon has emerged in our postmodern context, but (again) is still located within the realm of the "Street Art world". Thus, today in this sense, urban Art is arguably more limited as a concept than it was at the end of the 19th century.

Commissioned murals are a form of (low cost) public Art, now adapted to digital dissemination on social media. The number of mural festivals, internationally, is rapidly expanding, with the ethos of, "give them a wall and a cherry picker". This development is supported by a rapidly growing urban art market and commercial ecosystem (ex:tours).

Given a critical awareness of the particularities of Graffiti and Street Art, and visual signs in general (street usage), perhaps both public and urban Art together may in future generate a critical mass for the expansion of the boundaries of the (Street) Art world(s) and came closer to the socially engaged utopian ideals of the end of the 19th century.

3.1 - Comparison of the **relations between Urban Art concepts in Expo'98 and 2008 (GAU)**

3.1.1 - Similarities in the approach:
- Both have concerns addressing the problematic of public space usage;
- Both introduce influences (or are signs of influence) in the usage practices of the territory;
- Both are distant from the past/old static concept of statuary as the expression of art in the city, this way both search to generate (and or are the result) of dynamism;
- Both have concerns about the role of a piece within the spatial logic of the territory;
- Both work to overcome the monolithic vision of the city;
- Both make considerations and selections about the places of implementation;
- Both search for a reaction to the generalized indifference, suggesting paradoxical and discontinuous elements within the urban tissue;
- Both (try to) escape the mere logic of objects in the landscape;
- Both go beyond the aesthetic value and artistic gesture;
- Both are not decorative figuration (although the 2008 tend partially to configure figurative);
- Both provide a common point for a dialogue about a strategy of deconstruction and re-construction of urban space (although in 2008, this tends partially not to be connected to the urban space construction, mainly if interpreted as murals);
- Not exclusively integrated into a specific sectorial strategy dedicated to the visual arts (although the 2008 have this predominance);
- Shared notion of group of pieces (both 1998 and 2008), collective body;
- Shared accomplishment of desire of new philosophy for space occupation;
- Both operate at the level of the image of the public space, aiming positive (although in the case of 2008 some are just critic, or encryption), shared and open territory (in 2008 by the practice);
- Both consider relevant the transgression and the non-pacified character of the works, although graffiti and street art transgress the limits of the law, working with the public private dialectics, 2 dimensions, the message and the transgression itself, 1998 urban art have the transgression only in the message.

3.1.2 - Differences on the approach:

- The 1998 urban art "works will not make sense if left to the criminal hand of time or men neglect", the 2008 urban art is undefined in time duration or (in the majority of the cases) clearly ephemeral, it will (only) make sense to be called graffiti or street art if works are left to "criminal hand of time or men neglect";

- in 1998 the removal of one piece will damage the collective body, in 2008 the removal of one piece is part of the process;

- in 1998 there were worries about the introduction of contemporary art in the public space, Graffiti and Street Art do not have the (contemporary art) status;

- break the anonymity of the public spaces, generating places for permanence (2008 generically do not have this concerns);

- 1998 has the purpose of humanizing the urban landscape, 2008 does not have this purpose, the humanization of the landscape exists but as a consequence;

- distinct audience purposes, 1998 searches for generating reference places and points for citizens, 2008 generates reference points for (sub) cultural groups, only latter mass culture absorbed;

- 1998 intends above all to generate a place of art, 2008 connection with art is not direct (or inexistent);

- 1998 has concerns about the social values of the works, in 2008 this consideration is not direct, although many works, authors and agents have this concern;

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